

Published: Sept. 10, 2016, *Kokomo Tribune* [Page: A1, jump to A6]

http://www.kokomotribune.com/indianakokomo/hale-on-the-campaign-trail/article_98f46184-76fb-11e6-95a7-6f64016633c2.html



Tyler Stewart | News and Tribune

COMMUNITY: State Rep. Christina Hale takes a moment to chat with 4-year-old Genevieve Noe, New Albany, while moving spending time at the Farmers' Market in downtown New Albany on July 30.



Joseph C. Garza | Tribune-Star

STRONG VOICES: Rep. Christina Hale, D-Indianapolis, talks about her work as an advocate for victims of sexual assault before the showing of a PSA on Sept. 18, 2015 at Gibault Children's Services in Terre Haute.

Hale on the campaign trail

Democratic lieutenant governor candidate talks policy

By Rob Burgess

Kokomo Tribune

When Democratic lieutenant governor candidate Christina Hale took the time for an exclusive interview before Sunday's Labor Day rally at United Auto Workers Local 685 Union Hall at 929 East Hoffer St., she said knew what it was like on the other side of the questions.

Before she began representing the 87th district in the Indiana House of Representatives in 2012, her first job was as a reporter for the LaPorte Herald-Argus.

“It's strange to be a candidate for anything, or to even be a public person,” she said. “What I liked about journalism it's like, stay out of the story. Never become part of the story.”

After leaving journalism, she worked at the Indiana Department of Commerce and the Indiana Professional Standards Board before being named a special assistant to Gov. Frank O'Bannon overseeing the state's boards and commissions, according to the campaign website she shares with her running mate, gubernatorial candidate John Gregg. Hale then joined Kiwanis International in 2004 as chief communications officer.

Hale said making the transition to the spotlight came with a unique set of challenges.

“It's everything from being at Kroger with your glasses and a bun on your head and people say, 'Oh, you don't look like your picture,'" she said. “And [they] want to talk to you about something. And you're like, 'I'm just trying to throw stuff in my car and get out of here.' People feel they can say anything to you. In some instances, kind of lose your, not humanity, but you're no longer a relatable person. You're a figure, like a character in a movie.”

NEW OPPONENTS

When Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump officially announced Gov. Mike Pence as his running mate July 15, he threw the governor's race into a frenzy. Trump's declaration came just minutes before the deadline for Pence to remove his name from the ballot. The state Republican Party was inundated with prominent party members looking to replace Pence, including Rep. Susan Brooks, Rep. Todd Rokita and Lieutenant Gov. Eric Holcomb. In the end, Holcomb was selected as Pence's replacement on the ballot, and state auditor Suzanne Crouch was picked as his running mate.

Hale said this turmoil didn't change the way either she or Gregg approached the race.

"We haven't changed our strategy at all," she said. "For us it's always been about policy and the issues. We continue to publish our policy position papers."

Before Pence's exit, his re-election campaign was severely handicapped by the fallout of the signing of such divisive socially conservative bills including the Religious Freedom Restoration Act and a new law restricting abortions. Yard signs declaring "FIRE PENCE" dotted the landscape.

"That 'Fire Pence' movement was really something organic that was not at all coordinated with our campaign," she said. "It started with a guy who

made some signs and left them on his porch ... and it just kind of took off on social media.”

Still, Hale said it was impossible not to wonder what would become of the race once Pence was out of the picture.

“It was certainly an odd time not knowing who our opponents would be for a number of weeks,” she said. “We are human beings so you think, 'Gosh, what's happening here?' Just lying awake in bed some nights thinking about what could happen.”

During a news conference announcing Crouch as his running mate Aug. 1, Holcomb said that he was "quite proud" of where Indiana stands after the past 12 years of Republican governors, according to The Associated Press. Hale said with the HIV crisis in several counties and the associated needle exchanges, staggering infant mortality rates and low per capita income, it was a record she was ready to challenge.

“That, too, was very motivating,” said Hale. “Because it's beyond time for change. We have real issues facing Indiana. You have to get to work on them urgently and we just don't have time to waste on all this divisive social nonsense. And a lot of invented problems that we didn't have. Where were the tridents and pitchforks for the war on religion? I never got one complaint in my Republican district that I represent about any imagined war on religion. ... [There] are real issues, so let's get to work.”

PROTECTING CHILDREN

One of Hale's main focuses since entering public life is the protection of children from sexual violence. She has co-sponsored several bills with Republican colleagues to address human trafficking.

"That's not a Republican or Democrat issue," she said. "We're one of the worst states in the nation when it comes to protecting kids from sexual violence. ... It's a terrible problem. I think that's one of the reasons John asked me to be his running mate. Because I don't care about the politics, I just want to get things done. He's certainly beyond ready to roll up his sleeves and go to work for all Hoosiers. We don't believe in Republican and independent ideas, we just believe in good ideas and bad ideas. It's that simple."

With Hale's district being situated on the north side of Indianapolis, which is known for accommodating crowds in town for large sporting events, she said the issue hit particularly close to home for her. She said he has partnered with Republican Attorney General Greg Zoeller to place bars of soap in motels and hotels around the city before large events with information on how human trafficking victims can call for help.

"I don't know how effective it is, but we're trying to bypass the pimping boyfriend slash guard type," she said. "Some motels and hotels will take

them and put them in the bathroom and they're just printed with a lifeline phone number."

She said education for law enforcement was another piece of the puzzle as they would be in the best positions to treat the victims with the care they deserve.

"These girls know a crime is being committed, so they're afraid to go to the police," she said. "They're afraid of their pimp. Oftentimes they're branded in a family to like an organized union of crime. And they're using illegal drugs. And this is just a way to say like call this lifeline for someone to help, not necessarily the police. But we need the police to know this is happening as well, so when they do have a bust they are treated appropriately as victims."

DRUG REFORM

Indiana has been ground zero for the national opiate crisis. According to a 2012 Indiana Department of Health report, overdoses increased five fold since 1999, surpassing motor vehicle traffic-related deaths in 2008.

Hale said the current punitive approach to dealing with drug users was not only ineffective but costly.

"We're just cycling them through custody that taxpayers pay for only to get out to re-offend to support their drug habit," she said. "We have to help

people first get off drugs and then transition back to their families, their communities and their jobs so they can become productive citizens again. We have to grow up and start dealing with this problem like adults and say we can help people recover.”

Hale said there is a fiscal conservative case to be made for treating addicts like patients instead of criminals.

“The taxpayer is paying for all of this,” she said. “And there is a human cost. ... And there's the nonsense of it being just a really harmful cycle that we could put a stop to if we worked smarter. And we could even save a great deal of money for the state and local government. And that's not even including the hidden costs of law enforcement having to patrol and arrest people. It really gets expensive.”

State Sen. Karen Tallian, D-Ogden Dunes, has introduced bills to legalize marijuana in Indiana to no avail. Hale said this type of shift in Hoosier marijuana policy was probably still years away. However, she said saw signs of progress with the legalization of industrial hemp.

“Indiana still hasn't passed Sunday sales of alcohol,” she said. “I think it's coming because people are demanding it, especially medical, from both sides of the aisle and independents. It's been clear it's helped some people. And they feel passionately about that. That said, I suspect it's going to be

like equality issues that seem to be stuck for a number years and suddenly change.”

TEACHER SHORTAGE

Indiana Superintendent of Public Instruction Glenda Ritz has made stemming Indiana's rising teacher shortage a top priority. Hale said she shared Ritz's goal of reversing this trend.

“Everywhere I've traveled in Indiana I hear the same story from current teaching staff and educators and those who have already gotten out of the profession,” she said. “There's a great deal of frustration. And I think there's been a lot of unintended negative consequences to some of the initiatives that have been put into place over the past 10 years, especially tying performance to these high-stakes testing situations for students. ... We can't continue to bleed good teachers.”

Hale said she was some progress with the removal of the ISTEP earlier this year.

“We've been tasked with finding a new strategy for that,” she said. “We need to be attracting the best and brightest to teaching, not scaring them away. And, that's not a partisan issue, but it's certainly an urgent issue.”

UNION JOBS

Last year, many groups protested Gov. Pence's repeal of the common construction wage law which had previously allowed local boards to determine set pay rates. Hale said this, along with so-called “right to work” laws which prevented nonunion members from being forced to pay unions to represent them, had severely hampered wages in the state.

“What we have is a whole lot more people working many more lousier jobs,” she said. “When I was a kid in the '80s, most households could be supported with one breadwinner. That's not the case any longer. Why do we have an abandoned housing problem all throughout our state? It's because we had ... oftentimes union jobs, good paying jobs, that are just gone.”

She said she was Republicans as well as Democrats testify against such changes in employment law.

“If you don't have that negotiated wage it's so easy to bring in workers from out of state,” she said. “And the last thing we need to do with these good paying skilled labor jobs is have people from Florida or Illinois coming in to take our Hoosier jobs. I think it lacks good strategy about the economics behind some of the policies the present administration has pursued.”

TRUMP EFFECT

With the rise of Trump during this election cycle, many Democrats around the country have been forced to reevaluate their approach, especially as it

relates to non-college educated white males. Hale said she was ready to learn from the phenomenon.

“I think a lesson to be learned is everyone is really ready to hear from leaders who aren't so scripted,” she said. “That are authentic. And that will speak their mind rather than be filtered through a lot of spokespeople and through talking points. And I can't blame them for that. Maybe we should pay some attention to that. If you go a lot of people's websites, or Facebook pages or Twitter, somebody else is speaking for them. The voting public deserves to hear from the candidate themselves.”

As she canvassed the state, Hale said she was making listening to the voters one-on-one a top priority.

“One thing I'm trying to do is travel the state and talk to people in real time,” she said. “So, we'll go to a coffee shop and just invite everybody. This what I started doing when I was a [representative.] Once a week I would go to a different coffee shop like McDonald's or something, I'd call them meet-ups. And it was people from both sides of the aisle, so it was not a safe space. You wouldn't know who was out there or what their politics are. You'd have to be transparent and consistent. And they'd ask you a question and you'd have to say, 'This is what I think.'”

Hale said this experience taught her there was less dividing the electorate than it might appear on the surface.

“There are really three parties: the two kind of calcified parties that any other idea from the other side is a bad idea, and it's always wrong and they'll never listen. And everyone else in the middle, which is most of the people,” she said. “[They] say, 'Hey, we just want you to be good stewards of our tax dollars and do the right thing and work smarter.' And that's what I'm listening to. I think that's really good advice. I think we need to, as Donald Trump has done, to step away from the teleprompter more often and be in touch with the people we represent on a more human level without filter.”

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